

# Dysfunction, Deviancy, and Sexual Autonomy: The Single Female Detective in Primetime TV

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/tvn](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/tvn)**Kate R. Gilchrist**<sup>1</sup> 

## Abstract

As the number of single women has grown within Anglo-American society, there has been a proliferation of discourses around single women within popular culture. At the same time, there has been a resurgence in female-centered media representations of detectives. This article asks what cultural work the convergence of the single woman with the unconventional figure of the detective performs, and what this means for contemporary feminine subjectivities, exploring how she is constructed in three primetime TV crime dramas: *The Bridge*, *The Good Wife* and *Fargo*. I argue that while the single female detective foregrounds discourses of professionalism, rationality, and sexual autonomy, she simultaneously reinscribes patriarchal discourses of heteronormative coupledness and normative femininity through her social dysfunction, vulnerability and deviance, rendering the single woman a threat to femininity. Yet, at times, her liminal positioning allows her to occupy a more transgressive feminine subjectivity and subversively trouble the gender binary.

## Keywords

popular culture, discourse, gender, feminism, identity, television

The female detective is an unconventional figure—her role requires high levels of intelligence and analytical skills and places her in dangerous situations. In recent years, the female detective has converged with another unconventional figure: the single woman. Census statistics show that over the past two decades the number of

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single women (defined as never married or not in a civil partnership) in the US-UK context has grown, from 27 percent in 2003 to 33 percent in 2015 in England and Wales (ONS, 2015). In the US, 25 percent of women were single in 2003, rising to 29 percent by 2015 (US Census Bureau, 2019). As numbers have increased, there has been a proliferation of representations of the single woman within contemporary popular culture (Taylor 2012). But despite this, cultural texts continue to construct her in narrow ways (Taylor 2012). There has also been a resurgence in representations of single female detectives, with shows such as *Killing Eve* (BBC One, 2018–), *The Fall* (BBC Two, 2013–2016), *Homeland* (Channel Four, 2011–2020) and *Jessica Jones* (Netflix, 2015–2019), enjoying immense popularity. I ask what cultural work the convergence of single femininity with the detective role performs in three contemporary TV series: *Fargo* (Channel Four, 2014), *The Good Wife* (More 4, 2013), and *The Bridge* (BBC Four, 2012). I locate my analysis within the contemporary political and social context, to consider how the figure of the single female detective is emerging here, and what this means for constructions of feminine subjectivity. I argue such representations reinvigorate and transform tropes of single femininity in new ways. While the single female detective draws on stigmatizing historical depictions of single femininity as emotionally dysfunctional, these are reanimated through postfeminist discourses of professionalization. And although the single female detective challenges gendered norms of femininity as non-violent, she is still linked to abjectifying tropes of vulnerability. Each of these configurations render the single woman a threat to normative femininity and recenter heteronormative coupledness at a time when marriage rates are in decline. More subversively however she is constructed as enjoying a radical autonomous sexuality.

## The Mediated Figure of the Single Woman: Past and Present

Contemporary postfeminist constructions of the single woman draw upon multiple historical discourses which have long been used to construct single femininity. Postfeminism is a contested term, understood here as a cultural discursive shift rather than a historical period, characterized by themes of hypersexualization (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 2006); individualized autonomy and an agentic, desiring sexual subject (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2007). More recently, postfeminist culture incorporates a regulatory affective mood where subjects must remain confident and upbeat (Elias et al. 2017). Angela McRobbie has claimed that the decline of social welfare and restructuring of global capitalism relies on the increasing participation of women in the workplace. This has given rise to a postfeminist “gender regime” characterized by a new sexual contract where middle-class women postpone reproduction to pursue workplace gains, and emulate a pleasure-seeking, masculinized sexuality (McRobbie 2007, 720–21, 732). All of these themes coalesce in complex ways within the figure of the single female detective.

At the same time as the emergence of postfeminist culture, traditional religious, familial, and moral conventions have shifted within the West in the post-industrial

period (Beck 1995) leading to what has been called a “transformation of intimacy” (Bauman 2003; Giddens 1992). Evidenced by a decline in marriage rates, it has been argued that there is a move toward the “pure relationship,” one which is not bound by social structures or institutions (Giddens 1992). I argue that empirical shifts which are part of this, such as an increase in single women, have led to a reactionary recentering of heteronormative coupledness through the derogation of single women at the cultural level. Where the female single detective engages in such “transformations,” she is penalized by being returned to the (coupled) domestic sphere, or abjectified as deviant, linked to both masculinity and vulnerability. Postfeminist constructions of the single female detective within these texts draw on and reconstruct historical discourses of the single woman in ways which radically invoke single femininity, only to send her back to the domestic sphere, or restigmatize her as “other.”

Within Anglo-American culture, across cultural and historical texts, the single woman has long been linked to the pejorative category of the chaste/asexual “spinster” (Fink 2012, 27; Israel 2003). Despite claims of its redundancy, the spinster trope lingers, yet it is now more associated with social isolation than chastity (Fink 2012, 34; Lahad and Hazan 2014, 135). Within the figure of the single female detective, particularly the older “second wave” feminist detective, stigmatizing tropes of loneliness and workaholicism continue to center normative femininity as heteronormatively coupled. For example, Helen Mirren’s influential, long-running portrayal of Detective Jane Tennison in *Prime Suspect* positions her as isolated and burned-out (Brunsdon 2013, 387–88).

Deviancy has also historically been intersected with class, race, and sexuality to construct the single woman as criminal (Froide 2005, 21). The development of psychoanalysis in the 1920s/1930s tied single women to emerging ideas of emotional/sexual dysfunction (Israel 2003, 144) and vulnerability (Holden 2002, 492). Indeed single femininity in the present moment is still abjectly constructed through themes of deviancy and dysfunction (Wondemaghen, 2019), and intersected with race, class and sexuality to regulate black, working class, and non-heterosexual femininities (Willey, 2014). Yet, the single female detective intertwines deviancy—specifically violence—with emotional dysfunction and vulnerability in potentially transformative ways.

Discourses of promiscuity in the early twentieth century hypersexualized working class, migrant and black single women (Israel 2003, 204). Postfeminist culture has more recently also hypersexualised white, heterosexual femininity (Willey 2014)—as exemplified in the detective genre by *The X Files*’ Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson). Yet, single femininity in the texts I examine here has been more positively reconfigured through discourses of sexual autonomy.

The middle- and upper-class single woman was historically associated with professionalization, with the “single career woman” both glamorized *and* denigrated as a “failed woman” at different times in popular novels and magazines (Holden 2007, 39). Several feminist media scholars have noted that postfeminist culture superficially foregrounds and fetishizes the detective’s professional success (Brunsdon 2013; Jermyn 2017; Steenberg 2017). I argue that the single detective continues to celebrate

discourses of professionalism, but this obscures how she also revives tropes of emotional dysfunction and deviancy.

## The Female-Centered Detective: From Unfeminine to Fun

The popularity of the detective genre and its preoccupation with identity makes the detective a productive site for investigation of how the boundaries of single femininity are being reformed and reinscribed. While the detective narrative has traditionally “foregrounded masculinist and misogynistic narratives” (Munt 1994, 10), which valorize a “masculinized, positivist rationality” (Holquist 1971, 141), the female detective is now commonplace in primetime television crime series. Those few earlier female-centered portrayals typically involved tropes of an unfeminine, workaholic, troubled, no-nonsense detective. These were embodied by *Prime Suspect*’s Jane Tennison (Helen Mirren), who struggled to maintain relationships, and Sharon Gless’ Christine Cagney from *Cagney & Lacey*, both of whom were alcoholics. Charlotte Brunsdon argues that more recent portrayals, such as *Murder in Suburbia*, merge a postfeminist understanding of the female detective as young, fun and lighthearted, with a repudiation of earlier second-wave “feminist” figures represented by older female detectives (Brunsdon 2013, 383, 385). Or she appears as a glamourized, hypersexualized woman, fetishized for her professionalism, as per Stella Gibson (Gillian Anderson) in *The Fall* (Steenberg 2017, 60). Deborah Jermyn claims such texts give a “superficial nod” to professional progress while leaving misogynistic depictions of violence against women intact (Jermyn 2017, 266).

While there is not space to explore how the single female detective compares to her coupled counterpart, Ben Bethell argues that in *Cagney & Lacey*, troubled single Christine is contrasted with her dependable by-the-book married partner Mary Beth (Bethell 2015, 99). Yet Julie D’Acci suggests that while Christine’s bad-girl character is presented as a “work in progress,” this productively prevents her from solidifying into the more normative femininity Mary Beth represents (D’Acci 1994, 195). More recently, Amanda Greer has noted how the coupled detective, such as Ellie Miller (Olivia Coleman) in *Broadchurch*, is more likely to appeal to “simplistic gender roles” (Greer 2017, 335). The texts I analyze hark back to masculinized tropes of earlier constructions, but transform them through entwinements with deviance, and feminized tropes of vulnerability and sexualization. Following a postfeminist logic, I argue the single detective within the texts is invoked in *apparently* celebratory ways, only to then be stigmatized or returned to the domestic sphere of coupledom—yet in some moments she represents a more transgressive feminine subjectivity.

## The Bridge, The Good Wife, Fargo: Repetitions and Reconfigurations

It is in this context of growing visibility of the single woman in postfeminist mediated culture and increasing numbers of single women, that I situate the female detective in three transnationally distributed TV crime dramas. The analysis includes US and

European texts as both postfeminist discourses and the crime fiction genre with which I am interested are increasingly transnational in circulation (Dosekun 2015; Jermyn 2017). The selection is inspired by Lilie Chouliaraki, who argues that the repetition of different, but interrelated, regimes of representation across texts within global networks indicate significance (Chouliaraki 2006). I am interested in how single femininity is being configured through the detective in contemporary culture yet remain attentive to signs of disruption or reinvigoration. Therefore the texts are selected not only for the persistence of gendered tropes of singledom, but also for their potential transformation. While the texts span different locations and subgenres, they repeat tropes of mental dysfunction, vulnerability, and social isolation, allowing for an intersectional analysis of how they vary according to race, embodiment, sexuality, and disability. Finally, the texts are chosen as part of a feminist effort to counter a dominant scholarly focus on masculinity in quality crime TV (Lagerwey et al. 2016; Negra and Lagerwey 2015).

*The Bridge* (originally *Bron/Broen*) is a Scandinavian crime thriller co-produced in Sweden and Denmark and broadcast in more than 100 countries. It is an immensely popular text from the Nordic Noir subgenre (Jermyn 2017, 264), garnering large audiences and critical acclaim while presenting complex feminisms which challenge gender norms (McHugh 2018). In Season 1 (2012), Saga Norén (Sofia Helin) is the lead detective at a large police department in Sweden. Saga embodies a youthful, slim, white, middle-class femininity, which Janet McCabe argues is a globally privileged form of beauty which traverses national borders (McCabe 2019, 303). Her character therefore allows an intersectional examination of how racially privileged femininity travels transnationally. While *The Bridge* repeats stigmatizing historical tropes of single femininity as dysfunctional, Saga also reconfigures tropes of mental “dysfunction” in more celebratory ways, and at times challenges the gender binary. Though there are four seasons of *The Bridge*, I focus on Season 1, where Saga’s character is single. It should be noted that later seasons reveal more about her complex family history and romantic ties.

*The Good Wife* is a popular legal-political drama set at a US law firm. Produced for US network broadcaster CBS, while it is not a detective show, it draws on tropes from crime drama, through the figure of the single female detective, in interesting ways. The show is hailed as a prime example of mainstream, yet niche, quality TV which explores a rich and complex spectrum of feminist and anti-feminist discourse (Miller 2016, 156). Kalinda Sharma (Archie Panjabi) is a middle class, thirtysomething, bisexual of Indian ethnicity,<sup>1</sup> who is a private investigator at the firm. Leonie Taylor argues Kalinda’s character is a site of contestation, allowing for examination of how ethnic minority and bisexual femininity work together to break with or sustain gendered norms (Taylor 2016). While the other detectives are lead characters, Kalinda is a high-profile secondary character—yet her marginal positioning perhaps offers a more radical representation. She must maintain interest across Season 4’s twenty-two episodes, with only intermittent appearances, but this long run perhaps leads to a richer, more nuanced portrayal (Buonanno 2019, 195). It is important to note that while Kalinda’s character appears in six seasons of *The Good Wife*, Season 4 has been

selected for analysis as, while Kalinda becomes briefly coupled in other seasons, in Season 4 she has no consistent romantic partnership, which is relevant to my interest in single femininity. It has also been chosen as this season in comparison to others focusses more closely on Kalinda's intimate life. I build on Michaela Meyer's argument that the secondary female, bisexual, non-white character is a significant trope in contemporary TV, used to shore up the dominance of the white heterosexual main characters they are positioned against, a troubling phenomenon which merits further investigation (Meyer 2010, 377–78).

Season 1 of *Fargo*—inspired by the 1996 film—was broadcast in 2014 to critical acclaim. *Fargo* was produced for US subscription TV channel FX by the Coen Brothers who have achieved a cult following for their dark, subversive storylines. Molly Solverson (Allison Tolman) is the deputy chief of the police department in the mid-west US city of Bemidji. Also white, she is thirty-one years old, but appears older. While a US text, *Fargo* shares many Nordic Noir tropes, with the opening titles showing wide panoramas of empty, snowy roads, conveying a similar sense of isolation and harshness, yet without the grittiness of urban life depicted in *The Bridge*. The series is similarly set in a predominantly white community, but allows for an exploration of how postfeminist tropes of single femininity may be transformed or reconfigured within a non-glamourized, non-urban setting, which is atypical of primetime, post-feminist depictions of femininity (Beadling 2019; Maddison and Storr 2004). While there are four seasons of *Fargo*, each have separate storylines and characters; Molly only appears in Season 1.

The texts were critically discursively analyzed to ask how the single female detective has emerged within the current social and political context and what cultural and ideological work the convergence of the single woman with the detective performs. I also consider how the single female detective disrupts or reinscribes dominant cultural understandings of feminine subjectivity in the contemporary moment. I present three central elements which emerged: emotional dysfunction as a form of professional success; violence as individualized empowerment; and an autonomous—at times subversive—sexuality.

## Repudiation of Emotion as a Form of Professionalized Dysfunction

The single female detectives in each series emotionally detach and isolate themselves from others to achieve professional success, in a discursive construction which perpetuates the linkage of single femininity with historical tropes of social or emotional dysfunction. All of the characters I focus on here are socially isolated to varying degrees: Saga displays such an extreme repudiation of feeling that she is constructed as pathologically emotionally dysfunctional, while Kalinda is shown as overly independent inside and outside the workplace. By contrast, Molly does show emotional connection to those around her, but this is always at a professional cost.

The opening scenes of *The Bridge* feature sweeping shots of empty city streets set under what seems to be the continual darkness of a Scandinavian winter, creating a



sense of cold isolation which mirrors the series' stony-faced protagonist, Saga Norén. Saga repudiates her emotions to an extent which borders on mental disability. Although this is never confirmed,<sup>2</sup> Saga depicts behavioral characteristics associated with neurodiversity, such as Asperger's, a form of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). In clinical discourse this is defined as abnormal communication, social isolation (Holton 2013, 48) and a "machine-like absence of emotion" (Bumiller 2008, 970). Indeed ASD is now a somewhat common trope of the female detective (Jermyn 2017, 265) and contemporary TV protagonists generally (McHugh 2018, 536). When we first meet Saga, a woman is begging to pass through a crime scene because her husband needs life-saving surgery. Saga is emotionless in her response, insisting the rules must be followed.

Saga frequently interrogates witnesses while they are in hospital, showing no thought for their welfare. In S1 E5, she forces a teenage witness in intensive care to give evidence during a brief moment of consciousness. When the girl falters, Saga urges her to keep going, dismissing her fear that she is dying. Seconds later she dies, and Saga shows only a flicker of concern that she may have been instrumental in her demise, constructing her as deeply insensitive. Such a depiction supports the "distinctive affective tone of postfeminism" that repudiates negative emotions (Elias et al, 2017, 25), but this is deepened to a pathological *absence* of emotion, which aligns with masculinized tropes of the detective (Klein 1988, 10).

Similarly, Saga's social isolation is implied to enable her professionalism. In S1 E3, late one night at the office, Saga's boss Hans confides that he is leaving and says his successor will appreciate having her as an employee. She replies by listing her positive attributes, which intertwine her professionalism with her singledom: "Extremely focused. Single. Successful. Clearly defined targets. Good at planning?" Hans nods in agreement. She looks puzzled and tells him she was describing the profile of the suspect, linking her with murderous associations and reinvigorating tropes of single femininity as criminally deviant (Froide 2005).

Saga's lack of relationships is contrasted against her "feminized" coupled co-detective Martin.<sup>3</sup> He prioritizes his wife and children over work, frequently calling them from the office, yet such commitments are not constructed as hindering his ability to do his job, unlike in the case of Saga. Her coldness and disconnection from those around her—Saga is often shown alone—pathologizes the single woman and validates normative coupled femininity as emotional, empathetic, and compassionate.

Saga is also linked to social dysfunction in the form of ASD. She is shown "rudely" ignoring her colleagues when they are speaking to her. Lost in thought, she doesn't notice social cues. Saga's character is consistent with representations of ASDs which "play on components of isolation. . . as a set of readily identifiable and overtly bizarre character traits," (Holton 2013, 53). But in such moments, she is not being antisocial—she is thinking about the case at hand. In S1 E9, she emerges from such a reverie having identified the killer's next move: killing Martin's son. Thus, Saga's character, rather than being threatening, heroically uses exceptional levels of cognitive functioning to save lives. Such feminized vulnerability blurs the boundaries between a masculinist rationality and stigmatizing ideas of "mental dysfunction," reconfiguring it as integral to her expertise.

Unlike earlier female detectives, such as Jane Tennison, Saga is not struggling in a male-dominated environment (Brunsdon 2013). She instead seems oblivious to gender barriers, thanks to her condition. Yet her neurodiversity places her outside the normative boundaries of femininity and “others” her as vulnerable in the social sphere. While feminist media scholars have highlighted the links between mental disorders and female detectives (Bevan 2015; Schmidt 2015; Wondemaghen 2019), Saga aligns with, yet also departs from one prime example. Carrie Mathison in *Homeland* suffers from bipolar disorder, which results in a feminized excess of, rather than an absence of, emotion (Steenberg and Tasker 2015, 135). Her chaotic, irrational, mental state nevertheless also produces her expertise and her isolation (Wondemaghen 2019, 132, 137). Thus while Carrie is hyperfeminized, Saga is masculinized through her disorder, not only reviving detective tropes but constructing singledom as a threat to femininity.

While, in *The Good Wife*, Kalinda builds close relationships with those around her, she is nevertheless independent and individualized in her associations with others. In S4 E16, Lockhart/Gardner decides to hire a second detective and Kalinda construes this as a challenge to her professional status. Rather than seeing it as support, she reacts with hostility and competitiveness and demands that the firm hire someone more junior. Kalinda takes an isolated, individualistic stance and asserts herself, consistent with postfeminist narratives of pursuing individualized gains through self-confidence and self-reliance (McRobbie 2007).

Throughout Season 4, the emotional intimacy of heterosexual coupledness is positioned as a threat to Kalinda’s professional success: when her ex-husband Nick appears, we see her losing focus at work. In one office scene, she absentmindedly doodles on her notepad while remembering the previous night with him. In S4 E8, her boss Will confronts her:

Will: So, what’s up with you? You’ve been away from work.

Kalinda: No.

Will: Mentally, you have.

Kalinda then reassures Will that she is “back,” but the emotional intimacy of her former relationship is constructed as challenging her intellectual ability, thinking and rationality, and aligning her with masculinist constructions of the detective as isolated (Klein 1988, 10). Her former normative heterosexual coupledness is made incompatible with her professional success, resecuring the postfeminist sexual contract as one where reproduction and traditional coupledness must be repudiated to prioritize workplace gains (McRobbie 2007, 732).

By contrast, *Fargo*’s Molly presents a more complex picture: she is not isolated within her community, but she does prioritize her career. While she enjoys a close relationship with her father, she often dismisses him in favor of work. In E1 she resists her father’s emotional appeal to give up her “dangerous” job and turns down a weekend with him to spend time in the office. Unlike Saga and Kalinda, Molly is firm not cold in her dismissal but, once more, the female detective has to isolate and detach



herself to succeed. Her professional success is seen to be incompatible with intimate sexual and familial bonds.

Such incompatibility is presented starkly for Molly at the end of the series. There is a timeskip during which she marries her colleague, Gus, and falls pregnant. Molly becomes distanced from her work, with her family ties hindering her career, something which can only be advanced while she is fully independent. At a vital point in the case, Gus demands she stay away from a crime scene, justifying Molly's responsibility as stepmother to his daughter as the reason for her not doing her job. Meanwhile he tracks down the killer. Molly reluctantly submits to her husband's request, seemingly adopting the "postfeminist masquerade" where aggression against male dominance is sublimated in favor of marriage and motherhood (McRobbie 2007, 726). As Amanda Greer argues, the female investigator is used to demonstrate that while women are told they can "have it all" in postfeminist culture, they must still prioritize marriage and motherhood (Greer 2017). Molly is required to not challenge Gus's absence from the home, but to return there herself.

Molly is eventually promoted to chief, but she is shown renouncing recognition of her achievements in favor of her husband. In the final scene of S1, which evokes normative ideals of domestic bliss, she is shown sitting on the sofa one evening, heavily pregnant, cuddling her husband and stepdaughter. Gus says: "They're gonna give me a citation for bravery. . . They really should be giving it to you." Molly retorts: "No. No, this is your deal. I get to be chief." Molly thus gets an individualized, private recognition—rather than the symbolic, collective recognition which her husband receives, an ending which reinscribes gender hierarchies. She finishes the series off work, her career "forever" paused by her coupled state, consistent with postfeminist logics of reproduction as incompatible with employment (McRobbie 2007, 732). Intimacy, emotional attachment and domesticity are resecured to femininity, and Molly's challenge to gender hierarchies as a single, professional, independent woman is foreclosed. Coupledness is presented as something which is temporarily postponed until reproduction resumes.

While the single female detective's repudiation of emotion works to secure her empowerment, it continues to be individualized, class-privileged success, reduced to economic gain and status, rather than a more radical revisioning that would allow women to engage in the workplace *and* enjoy fulfilling intimate relationships. This depiction links single femininity to masculinized logics of objectivity and cold rationality, and conversely valorizes oppositional forms of normative coupled femininity, which are resecured to emotion, domesticity, and the private sphere. The single female detective's emergence here foregrounds postfeminist, neoliberalized rhetorics of individualism, autonomy (Gill 2007), and professional advancement through postponement of reproduction (McRobbie 2007, 732).

## Deviance, Violence, and Empowerment

The single female detective continues to be associated with pathologizing historical tropes of deviancy but, within a postfeminist context, she reconfigures such deviancy in transformative, apparently liberatory, ways. Through her violence, she secures

professional success, but her empowering gains in the workplace obscure the fact that she is penalized for being “too masculine” and rendered vulnerable—indeed each of the violent acts that the single detectives commit are intertwined with vulnerability. Singledom is repositioned as an abject, dangerous state and the female detective is returned to the domestic sphere.

Saga commits several acts of extreme violence through which she makes significant advances in her cases and troubles the gender binary. In the penultimate episode of S1, she figures out the killer’s true motivation at the same moment she realizes she has been left unguarded and unarmed in Martin’s house. Despite the risk, in eerie silence, Saga leaves the house to pick up a gun which is lying outside and is shot by the killer. Thus her deviant, assertive behavior is immediately penalized for being “too masculine” and she is wounded. While she is taken to hospital, she defiantly discharges herself, still bleeding. She nevertheless manages to resolve the case through a violent three-way shoot out in the final episode, reaching the pinnacle of her career. Her extreme, “masculinized,” violent behavior is rewarded with a promotion. But this represents a limited, individualized, neoliberalized form of empowerment.

Similarly, Kalinda is regularly shown attacking her ex-husband Nick and his associates. While *The Good Wife* often depicts Kalinda in the bright, glamorous offices of the law firm, the opening scene of S4 shows Kalinda in a darker light, ominously sitting in a chair in her apartment with the lights off. There is a knock on the door, and the handle slowly turns, evoking codes of horror-movie suspense. Yet Kalinda is prepared for the visit from Nick’s employee, and she confidently pulls out a gun and pistol whips him into submission. When Nick threatens her colleague and Kalinda’s position at work (S4 E10), she gets rid of him by running over his employee with her car. Rather than showing concern, she leaves the man lying on the ground and drives off smiling, in a scene which is triumphant, almost joyous. The motivation for the attack is to protect her colleague, get rid of her ex, and preserve her job; all of which she achieves.

But the pattern of violence against her ex-husband and his staff is combined with moments where Kalinda herself is attacked by Nick and rendered vulnerable. Despite this, she is shown as being emotionally drawn to him in a dysfunctional way. In S4 E2, in a reversal of the earlier scene, we see Kalinda walk into her dark apartment to find Nick sitting in the same chair, pointing a gun at her. When she strides past, her heels defiantly clicking as she slams the door behind her, he smashes a mirror in anger. Yet she responds to his aggression by kissing him. She repeatedly tells him to leave her alone, but as he points out (S4 E1), she continues to allow him in her life:

Nick: You see this? It’s my new tattoo. That is a midnight sun, and I got it for you.

Means “new beginning.”

Kalinda: It’s over.

Nick: You know why it’s not over. You could’ve run. You knew I was coming. . . but you stayed.

Even though Nick is emotionally and physically abusive, and threatening her career, Kalinda still wants him. There is a sense that Kalinda longs to resist him but lacks the

strength. So, while Kalinda is empowered through the violence she inflicts on him, such deviance is always wrapped in an emotional and economic vulnerability. While Kalinda achieves her goals—like Saga through an empowering form of violence—such goals are limited to work, and she is left with the emotional vulnerability inflicted on her by Nick. Kalinda's character blurs the boundaries between a masculinized deviance and a feminized vulnerability, showing that the single woman can perhaps occupy both spheres simultaneously. Yet Kalinda has to expel her ex to secure her professional success, reinscribing the trope of the single woman as a socially isolated career woman and resecuring normative femininity to the heterocoupled norm.

As with Saga and Kalinda, in *Fargo*, Molly is shown challenging normative femininity by seeking out violence. In S1 E6, she defies the instructions of her colleague Gus and confidently runs into the middle of a dramatic shootout in a snowstorm to kill a suspect. But seconds later she herself is accidentally shot by Gus. When she is lying wounded in hospital, she makes the most significant breakthrough in her case, gathering conclusive evidence. But as she is explaining her analysis, her father interrupts her to take her home in a wheelchair, underscoring her vulnerability. She never regains her position at the forefront of the case and goes on to marry Gus. Thus, for Molly, while singledom foregrounds a postfeminized professional success and agency, such success is curtailed and masks the fact that she is then confined to the coupled, domestic sphere—protected from the “dangers” of singledom.

For each detective, while violence brings empowerment and breaks with normative ideals of femininity, this empowerment is exclusively professional in nature. Such success obscures how she is then penalized, curtailed and repositioned as vulnerable or dysfunctional. For Molly, she is returned to the home, recentering the patriarchal, coupled norm, and rendering singledom threatening. Not only do these examples continue to link the female detective to professional effectiveness and vulnerability (Steenberg and Tasker 2015, 135), they realign normative femininity with domesticity.

## **Autonomy and Subversion: Challenging the Boundaries of Sexuality**

Kalinda and Saga are presented as highly autonomous and desiring sexual subjects and as enjoying a “liberalized” agentic sexual freedom (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2007). Embodying Angela McRobbie's “Phallic Girl,” both possess “a healthy sexual appetite” and “assertive, hedonistic styles of sexuality associated with young men” (McRobbie 2007, 732). Although Molly is not shown engaging in such sexual behavior, her character's sexuality troubles the hypersexual/asexual binary. Through her liminal positioning, the single female detective subverts not only hypersexualized, heterosexual femininity but also the monogamous norm. Yet such liberation masks the ways in which she is at times still pathologized by her sexuality.

While feminist critiques of crime drama argue that the postfeminist detective is valued “as much [for her] . . . desirability as [her] forensic and moral authority” (Steenberg 2013, 58) and is often girly and sexy (Brunsdon 2013), Molly challenges

this. She does not conform to an ideal feminine body type and she “punctures the affective, aspirational allure” of glamorized beauty norms and embodiment (Beadling 2019; White 2015). Her appearance blurs the binary of the older, unattractive detective and the younger, glamorized detective, being both youthful at thirty-one, but not girly, plain yet not unattractive. In E3, she meets with a friend who asks if she is dating. She chuckles, describing herself as: “An old ship captain. You know, I’m married to the sea,” drawing on asexualizing “old maid” tropes (Froide 2005). But she is not depicted as undesirable, later attracting the attention of her colleague, Gus. Molly thus subverts fetishizing tropes of hypersexualization but also resists being returned to the older, asexualized, masculinized single detectives typical of earlier incarnations.

Meanwhile Saga’s sexual behavior is entwined with stigmatizing tropes of single femininity as emotionally dysfunctional. Saga conforms to ideals of feminine beauty—she is slim, wears leather trousers and long boots—but is less glamorized than Kalinda, wearing no makeup and leaving her long blonde hair tousled. Yet she enjoys a masculinized form of sexual autonomy—we see her going to bars alone to seek casual partners. While she is sexually promiscuous, none of her relationships are emotionally intimate. She is deeply disengaged from such encounters and not only does she prioritize work, her promiscuity is linked to extreme insensitivity.

In E1, S2 Saga is shown alone in her apartment reading a book on law. She masturbates while still reading, before going to a nightclub and taking home the first man she meets, Anton. Immediately after they have sex, she turns over and begins looking at disturbing images of a mutilated body on her laptop. When Anton leaves, Saga fails to notice he is upset at her emotional detachment; she seems to be pathologically over-committed to her work. Saga is constructed as incapable of having anything more than emotionless sex, due to her ASD. Her behavior also suggests that women who enjoy casual sex must be dysfunctional, reaffirming the dominant postfeminist cultural fantasy of the young single woman as promiscuous (McRobbie 2007, 732). The celebration of her “liberated” sexuality thus hides a pathologization of female sexual promiscuity, and fails to challenge patriarchal logics.

Yet Kalinda troubles if not transforms these boundaries when she engages in multiple bisexual, non-monogamous relationships. She does not remain within the boundaries of the “Phallic Girl,” which would require her to fear the “slur of lesbianism” and she sleeps with several female partners over the series’ run (McRobbie 2007, 732). Notably, Kalinda is also hypersexualized: she wears tight-fitting clothes and heavy makeup. As an ethnic minority, she has to negotiate racialized, colonialist discourses which have historically othered ethnic minority women as hypersexualized and deviant (Taylor 2016; West 2008). Yet it is her very proximity to the borders of normative (white) femininity, which allows her to make such a challenge through her “unruly” promiscuity (Rowe 1995).

In contrast to Saga, Kalinda’s former heterosexual relationship is tarnished with emotional dysfunction which borders on physical and emotional abuse.<sup>4</sup> In S4 E3, Nick bumps into Kalinda’s girlfriend, Lana, and later confronts her:

Nick: I know you tried a lot of things when I was away, and I forgive you.

Kalinda: Thanks.

Nick: Yep. Don't change. You belong to me. I belong to you. And I know where your girlfriend lives.

Kalinda: I'd like to see you try.

Nick: I don't think you would.

Kalinda: Oh, I would. She's a federal agent.

Nick derogates Kalinda's same-sex relationship, laying claim to her as if she is an object to possess, positioning her bisexuality as a momentary lapse in her fundamental heterosexuality. Kalinda however responds by employing her (bi)sexual autonomy as a form of active resistance to his hypersexualization and heteronormative subjectification.

Meanwhile Kalinda's non-monogamous non-heterosexual relationships are presented as fun and fulfilling, and challenge the normative ideals of femininity as heterosexual and monogamously coupled (Willey 2014). While her casual relationships with women are decentered in the show in comparison to her bond with her ex-husband, her sexual affairs with women are largely positive encounters. Instead of being harassed and pursued, we see her negotiating these relationships on an equal footing. While Kalinda's former heterosexual relationship threatens her career, her non-monogamous same-sex relationships do not, and she invites her female partners into her workplace. She breaks with dominant discourses of white, female heterosexual singledom and foregrounds a more transgressive autonomous sexuality which radically challenges the single/coupled binary.

Kalinda contrasts to *The Good Wife's* focal character, Alicia, who is married, and a senior partner in the firm. Alicia juggles domestic and parenting commitments alongside her career, while trying to distance herself from her privately estranged husband's sex scandal. In this series, Alicia is tempted to reignite a previous affair with one of the other partners, Will, but she restrains herself. Thus, while Alicia does engage in affairs throughout other seasons, in S4 she intensively regulates her desires. This constructs her as more controlled and conservative than Kalinda, who is rarely shown regulating her desire. Kalinda is therefore opposed to Alicia's more normative self-regulating, white, heterosexual femininity, with Kalinda presented as enjoying a genuinely liberatory sexuality. While Alicia demonstrates sexual agency and punctures tropes of mothers as asexual (Orgad 2017, 166), she is dogged by her persona as the wife of her political husband and maintains a united public front with him for the sake of both their careers, concealing her other sexual liaisons (Leonard 2017, 136).

Thus while Molly subverts the hypersexualized/asexualized binary of single femininity, *Saga* is pathologized through her sexual behavior, suggesting continued societal anxiety over single femininity. Her characterization resecures normative femininity as monogamously coupled. Kalinda meanwhile enjoys multiple fulfilling liberatory same-sex encounters which are placed in opposition to her controlling heterosexual monogamous relationship with Nick. Indeed she uses her non-heterosexual, non-monogamous relationships as a defense to reassert her sexual autonomy. For Kalinda,

her positioning, while outside the boundaries of normative femininity marked by Alicia, successfully complicates and troubles such boundaries.

## Conclusion

The single female detective is represented in these three shows as a complex and ambivalent figure who at times transgresses, yet also resecures, postfeminist logics and patriarchal structures of femininity. While her rationality, repudiation of emotion and independence bring her success, such empowerment is restricted to individualized, class-privileged, professional gains. The single female detective here also reinvigorates historical and pathologizing tropes of single femininity as being emotionally dysfunctional. Yet this figure presents perhaps a more nuanced depiction than previously seen: while she resists being returned to the older, earlier masculinized depictions of female detectives, and is youthful, attractive, and sexually agentic and autonomous, her professionalism is not fetishized (Steenberg 2017). Contrary to feminist media analyses which have argued that the female detective's professional success is superficially valorized only to leave misogynistic depictions of violence against women intact (Jermyn 2017, 266), violence is instead depicted here as empowering—both personally and professionally—and troubles the gendered binary. Yet such transformative, empowering violence is entwined with abjectifying tropes of vulnerability, reinscribing patriarchal discourses of single femininity.

Unlike earlier incarnations of the female detective, as Charlotte Brunsdon suggests the postfeminist female detective is no longer struggling in a male-dominated workplace (Brunsdon 2013). Yet foregrounding of the *single* female detective's professional success obscures her simultaneous abject positioning as socially dysfunctional, dangerous "other" through her isolation, repudiation of emotion, and masculinized violence. Her success is presented as achievable only through her social isolation, and her high profile is incompatible with close, intimate sexual and familial bonds. The postfeminist female detective not only reaffirms the single woman as an isolated career woman, she also resecures emotional attachment and domesticity to normative, coupled femininity, discharging the threat of single femininity. The continued subordination of single femininity is masked by the foregrounding of neoliberalized professional and economic success.

While the single female detective's sexual freedom is celebrated, it is largely rendered incompatible with emotional intimacy. With *Saga* it abjectly constructs her as dysfunctional, deviant "other" to reaffirm dominant fantasies of single women as promiscuous, reinforcing normative femininity as monogamously coupled. However, Kalinda's positioning outside the racial, sexual and coupled norms of femininity allows her to trouble such regulatory boundaries and construct a more transformative reconfiguration of autonomous single female subjectivity. She offers moments of transgression, where heterosexual femininity and the monogamous coupled norm are subverted through a more radical "unruly" sexuality. Not only are Kalinda's non-monogamous, non-heterosexual encounters constructed as largely emotionally and sexually fulfilling, she uses her (bi)sexual autonomy to actively resist heteronormative



subjectification. Finally, building on debates in feminist media scholarship, Molly presents a more nuanced femininity, one which resists a binary understanding of the female detective as girly and hypersexualised, *or* as older, asexualized, and masculinized. Thus, while the single female detective as she appears here still sustains post-feminist logics, she is an important figure who may offer the chance to promote more radical feminist goals.

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### Notes

1. [https://thegoodwife.fandom.com/wiki/Kalinda\\_Sharma](https://thegoodwife.fandom.com/wiki/Kalinda_Sharma)
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/disability-34995327>
3. <https://alternativestovalium.blogspot.com/2014/02/take-it-to-bridge-saga-noren-and-martin.html>
4. Kalinda has a heterosexual relationship with her colleague Cary in Season 5.

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